

## Scripture That Has Changed My Life: 2 Corinthians 5:17

Pastor Jana Swenson, St. Mark Lutheran Church, 30 Mar 08

So how many of you woke up Friday morning, looked outside and groaned? How many of you were excited because more snow meant breaking a record? I don't know about you, but I'm ready for spring. Unfortunately, all it takes is a blanket of snow to make it feel like February all over again!

I was sitting at my dining room table Friday morning gazing out the window wishing for spring, when I looked down at the ground and saw something quite amazing. Here's what I saw. At first glance it looks like barren, rocky, snow-covered ground. But if you look more closely at the center of the picture you see a couple of tiny green leaves. These leaves are the beginning of a tulip plant. I ran outside for a closer look and sure enough, there was the beginning of several tulip plants poking through the winter ground.

I love perennial plants for two reasons. One - because they are often the first sign of spring; two - because they are a reminder of the seasons and cycle of life. When you think about it, tulips and other perennials are quite remarkable beings because they start from an ugly, life-less looking thing called a bulb. But within that bulb is just about everything needed to sprout and grow a beautiful flower. In fact, one article I read recently said, "a perennial bulb is really an underground storehouse and flower factory."

If you split a bulb in half length-wise, in the center there is a tiny bud cradled in leaves, and surrounded by several layers of white meaty-looking stuff called scales. These scales contain all the food the bulb needs to flower. All we need to do is put this ugly lifeless bulb in the ground in the fall, give it some water and leave it alone. A few months later, and sometimes even before the snow has melted, we get a gorgeous flower!

What's even more interesting is that the same bulb produces a uniquely different flower every year! A perfect example of the cycle of life: a bulb becomes a flower, barren ground becomes a colorful landscape, something that is dormant or dead comes to life.

I share this because it's a perfect analogy for the scripture I chose for today: **2 Corinthians 5:17** which reads, **"In Christ we are a new creation! The old has gone, the new has come."** I LOVE THIS VERSE, and this morning, I want to tell you why.

As Pastor Perry mentioned, in this sermon series each of us is preaching on a passage of scripture that has impacted our lives in some way. When I read this passage for the first time many years ago, it instantly became my theme verse - not so much because it "changed my life", but because it is an explanation of my changed life! I'll have more to share about that in a minute.

In order to fully appreciate this verse, we need to know a little about its context. If we were to read the Bible from beginning to end looking for the primary attributes, or roles of God, one that would surface is that of "creator". We could say that God is in the business of creating and re-creating things. What's the very first event recorded in the Bible? The creation of the universe.

And what's the very last thing recorded in the Bible? God's promise that when he returns, he will create a new heaven and earth. The book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, is a description of a "vision" God gave the apostle John about what would happen when Jesus returned. Listen to John explain this vision in **Revelation 21:1-4**. *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone... And I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying "Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them and they will be his people! God himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever."*

These two creation stories are the bookends, if you will, of the Bible. But in between them are the accounts of several cycles of life and death. Life came when God created the world; death came when Adam and Eve sinned. Life came when God chose Abraham to be the Father of a great nation; death came when God's people were disobedient and He scattered them among enemy nations. Life came when Jesus, the promised Messiah was born; death came when he was crucified on a cross. Life came when Jesus rose from the dead, but that was not the end to death. Physical death still comes to God's people. Fortunately life has the final word as we are raised to new life after our earthly death.

Now scripture also tells us that this cycle of life and death doesn't just take place physically, it also takes place spiritually. Paul explains this in **2 Corinthians 5:14**: *Since we believe that Christ died for everyone, we also believe that we have all died to the old life we used to live.* And in **Romans 6:3** Paul writes: *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"*

This is where my story comes in. I know first hand what it's like to "die to the old life I used to live." You see I didn't grow up in the church. I wasn't really an atheist, because my parents were Christians, but because they each went to their own church in different denominations, my parents chose not to raise me in either one.

So, I grew up believing there WAS a God, but not really knowing who that God was. During my sophomore year of college I began to feel a growing void, an emptiness I couldn't understand or explain. I struggled with who I was and where I belonged. I wasn't unhappy, but I wasn't happy either.

So I began filling that void with things that I thought would bring contentment. I joined, or "rushed", a sorority. Then I tried burying myself in my studies. Then I tried a serious dating relationship. You name it, I tried it. But nothing seemed to fill the void. As a matter of fact, the more I tried to fill it, the emptier I felt. Soon I was entrenched in deep philosophical questions regarding the meaning of life. Where do I belong? Who loves me? Who can I trust? What is the purpose of my life?

In the winter of my junior year I spiraled slowly and painfully into depression. The void consumed me. Then I got physically sick -- with mono -- and missed six weeks of school. That was the point at which I hit the bottom. The nice thing about hitting the bottom is that the downward fall finally stops. When you're falling, the only place you can look is down. But once you hit bottom, the only place you can look is up.

That same year I had become good friends with a freshman named Bridget. Bridget was a Christian – an active Christian. I was intrigued with her because she didn't fit my stereotype of a Christian. She wasn't afraid to talk about God, but she didn't cram-it-down-my-throat. She was bright, attractive, intelligent, and well liked by all. She had a joy and excitement for life that was contagious.

When I returned to school after recovering from mono, Bridget encouraged me to take a class that taught the basics of Christianity, which I did (something like our Alpha classes). A lot of what I learned provoked more questions, but it also provided some answers. I sensed something fulfilling in a lot of what I heard.

At the end of the class I was given the opportunity to be baptized. There was still a lot I didn't understand, but I knew it was time to take a step of faith. So without really knowing what I was doing, on April 20, 1986, I was baptized. According to the apostle Paul, that was the day that I died. That was the day 21 years of sin was put to death, along with my entire belief system, and my right to have any of the control in my life.

Thankfully, there's more to baptism than death! As Paul says in **Romans 6:3-4a**: *"We were buried with him by baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly be united with him in his resurrection. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with..."*

So in my baptism, I not only died, I was also resurrected! Now I have to admit that nothing magical happened at that moment. I didn't hear God speaking to me, or feel any different. In fact, I had no idea that I had just died, or been raised from the dead. But as the days, weeks and months passed, something began to happen. The tiny bud of a new creation that had lain dormant for so long began to poke through the barren soil of my life.

As I learned how to read the Bible and pray, and as I attended worship and met with my small group, I began to feel a peace and joy I hadn't felt before. And when I began serving on a youth ministry team, I began to feel a strong sense of purpose – a feeling that I existed for something more than myself.

Slowly my life style began to change. It wasn't easy and it took time for my values, priorities, and behaviors to change. There were many times I slipped back into old patterns. But when I look back on it, I still am surprised by the changes that took place – changes I could not have made by my own efforts. Changes that are a testimony to God's power to create new life and to bring life from death. And that brings us to the verse for today. The verse that explains my changed life:

***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” 2 Corinthians 5:17.***

So let me ask, are you “in Christ”? More specifically, have you been baptized? If not, do you believe in the promise of Easter, Jesus’ death and resurrection? Then **2 Corinthians 5:17** explains your life too. You may not have ever realized it, but you also have died to your old self and been raised to new life. You, too, are a new creation in Christ!

But that’s not the end of the story. Remember when I said that God is in the business of creating and re-creating things? The Bible tells us that becoming a new creation doesn’t just happen once physically and once spiritually and that’s it. Becoming a new creation in Christ is a regular ongoing process.

If we look back to the picture I showed you in the beginning, notice how the ground is hard and cracked, and the snow is even frozen. Life can be like that sometimes, can’t it. We can become hardened by life’s difficulties, under stress our relationships can crack or break down. When we get overwhelmed, we become emotionally dry... maybe even frozen.

But what we don’t always realize is that God can and does bring new life out of the parts of us that are dying. One of God’s specialties is to make you a new creation in Christ as often as you need Him to. And that happens every time you stop and remember who you are in Christ, every time you confess your sin or repentantly receive communion, every time you stop to pray or acknowledge God’s presence, every time you extend forgiveness, every time you choose the needs of another over your own. Every time you allow your old self to be put to death, your new self is reborn. The dead and dormant bulb gives way to another new and beautiful flower – every time! So,

- When you fail to make the sale, or to get the new job or promotion, and you claim your worth and identify in Christ and not your own success, you are “made anew”.
- When the demands of life wear you down and you take a few minutes of quiet time with God in prayer or reading the Bible you are renewed or re-creation with the strength to face the challenges of the day.
- When you get stuck in a pattern of sin you can’t get yourself out of, and you ask your small group to pray for you, your old self is put to death and your new self begins to emerge.
- When your friends betray you, or your marriage begins to crumble, and you freely ask for and offer forgiveness, you die and are raised to new life again.
- And when someone you love dies, and you acknowledge that you can’t get through this on your own, the creator of the universe goes to work, recreating hope and renewing your life in Christ.

Because if anyone is in Christ -- and you are -- they are a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come. Because God is in the creation business. He brings vibrancy from dormancy, light from darkness, good from evil, and life from death. So when spring finally comes and you see the tulips and other perennials begin to bloom, remember the verse that explains, not just my changed life, but your changed life, too. **2 Corinthians 5:17.** "If anyone is in Christ he is a NEW CREATION. The old has gone the new has come!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.